



Truancy Prevention Project

Holistic intervention to help students succeed

Why Truancy Matters

Truancy harms children, families and communities. Truancy is associated with:

- Academic failure and school dropout
- Lifelong poverty associated with low academic achievement
- Dependence on welfare and other public programs
- Social isolation
- Serious violent and non-violent crime
- Higher daytime crime rates
- Involvement with the juvenile justice system¹

Despite widespread acceptance that truancy leads to devastating short- and long-term consequences for individuals and society, communities have struggled to address it.

A recent review of truancy prevention programs around the country found that, despite interventions, participants were still absent from school at greater than acceptable levels.²

Truancy Prevention Project: A Unique Partnership

The Truancy Prevention Project (TPP) is a unique solution to a highly intractable problem. Unlike other models that address truancy, the TPP is holistic, addressing the needs of the whole child and his/her family.

The TPP holds informal court sessions at schools. Judges and case managers address underlying issues that impede a child's attendance. Each child's reason for missing school is unique, but the TPP, with its array of intensive services, uncovers the underlying problem and offers solutions.

Court sessions provide each child with guidance, accountability and a unique mentoring relationship with the judge. In addition to court sessions, each child's educational record is

¹ Baker, Miriam L., Nady Simon, Jane, and Nugent, M. Elaine. "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Kids in School," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, OJJDP, September, 2001.

² Maynard, Brandy R.; Tyson McCreary, Katherine; Kelly, Michael S. "Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance Among Chronic Truant Students," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* July 5, 2012

reviewed and legal advocacy and assistance is provided to address legal and/or educational impediments to attendance.

The TPP can provide this array of services because it is a unique partnership between:

- **Center for Children's Advocacy**
Legal assistance and advocacy, both individual and systemic
- **The Village for Families and Children**
Case managers who support children and families to overcome obstacles to attendance
- **Hartford Public Schools**
Space and institutional support
- **Connecticut Judicial Department**
Judges who mentor kids and hold them accountable

The TPP operates in two K-8 schools, the Alfred E. Burr Elementary School and the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School. Services are provided for students in grades 6, 7 and 8. Concentrating on the middle school grades, the TPP can intervene before students give up on school.

In the 2013-2014 school year, the TPP began to pilot service delivery to students in grades 1 and 2 because of the partners' observation that attendance problems often begin early in a child's education.

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"I needed more for her." Grace Pryce, parent

Kimberly Pryce* had perfect attendance last year, an amazing feat for a student who was one of the most frequently absent in the school. It was a triumph for Kimberly and for her mom.

Grace Pryce was always interested in helping her daughter succeed in school. However, the way education is organized in the United States is much different from what Pryce experienced in her native Jamaica. She sometimes found it difficult to get anywhere when she advocated for Kimberly, who has learning disabilities. "I needed more for her," she says.

Center for Children's Advocacy attorney Marisa Halm worked tirelessly to assure that Kimberly received appropriate special education services. Because of the legal assistance, Kimberly was finally tested to identify her needs. Her progress was reinforced by regular sessions with her TPP judge. Kimberly's case manager visited Grace and kept her updated on Kimberly's progress.

"The thing I really love is the encouragement. Everybody in the TPP supports me and Kimberly," says Pryce. "I tell her: Kimberly, you can be anything you want. She wants to be a veterinarian, so she is eager to learn. She is excited about school now."

*Not her real name

Effective Intervention

The Truancy Prevention Project (TPP) has a high success rate helping Hartford children improve attendance and school participation, academic performance and access to and engagement in pro-social activities. The TPP works because it:

- Draws on the strengths of a team with legal, social service and educational expertise – looking at the whole child
- Addresses a full spectrum of academic, health, family and social issues that can keep children out of school
- Empowers families
- Addresses systemic barriers

"I know you can do better." Hon. Stephen Frazzini

When Judge Stephen Frazzini holds a session with a student, he is there less as a judge and more as a coach. "I know you're really smart. I know you are capable. I know you can do better," he tells students on his caseload.

When Judge Frazzini meets a student, he typically reviews attendance issues and works with the student on goals that he monitors in ongoing meetings.

"I ask, 'Will you come in every morning and show your case manager that you did your homework?' They usually say yes," says Judge Frazzini. "Almost always, the attendance issues improve immediately."

Most of the poor attendance Judge Frazzini sees is rooted at least in part in academic struggles. Helping a child overcome those barriers requires sustained effort, but Judge Frazzini, who regularly sits in juvenile court, is committed to that work. He realizes how big a role education played in his own life and is struck by the contrast in the activities his own children enjoyed and what is available to the students he meets through the TPP.

For kids who have few enrichment opportunities, mentoring relationships can be rare. To have such a relationship with a superior court judge is extraordinary. "They are very much aware that I'm a judge," he says. "I always say that I'd rather meet you here than in my courtroom."

How TPP Works

Serving 60 students each year, the TPP has three main goals:

- **Improve attendance**
- **Increase academic performance**
- **Improve social engagement**

TPP accomplishes this by providing the following services:

- **Case Management**
Case managers are embedded in the schools and meet with the child 1-3 times per week. They connect families to services that address mental health or social barriers that may keep a child out of school. They track attendance and academic progress and engage families through regular home visits and calls. They match youth with appropriate pro-social activities, and meet with families of 8th graders to assist them in choosing a high school.
- **Mentoring and Oversight by Volunteer Judges**
During informal court sessions at the schools, judges develop mentoring relationships with students, help them set goals, and discuss progress.
- **Legal Assistance**
Attorneys review students' educational records and provide legal representation to secure appropriate plans in areas that affect attendance, such as education, special education, access to health and mental health services and public benefits.
- **Educational Review and Educational Advocacy**
An educational consultant reviews the school records of high-risk students and makes recommendations to improve academic performance. The consultant also observes classrooms and attends Planning and Placement Team meetings.
- **Systemic Advocacy**
Systemic issues such as fair discipline policies, appropriate bilingual education, access to tutoring and school choice often contribute to absenteeism and ultimately to drop out. Through TPP's presence in the school, partners can see and address these issues.
- **Incentives and Social Activities**
The community of learners is strengthened through family activities, such as dinners and outdoor adventure trips for children. Children receive awards and incentives, such as gift certificates, for outstanding attendance. Parents also receive incentives for encouraging students' positive behavior.

No Magic Bullet

“The most important outcome for a child is educational success. It is a predictor of future health, financial well-being and much more. If you can intervene at age 11 or 12, you can change the trajectory.” Hector Glynn, Vice President Outpatient and Community Services, The Village for Families and Children

The Village for Families and Children (Village) is a social service organization, already on site at both TPP schools. Each student in the TPP has an assigned Village case manager who tracks attendance daily and searches for the root causes of absences.

The program is by no means straightforward, and there is no “magic bullet” to address truancy. Village caseworkers become intensely involved with TPP families through home visits. They help families address mental health issues and other problems that can keep children away from school. They may also give very basic assistance, like providing an alarm clock.

“That’s one of the difficulties of the program: the more systems you’re involved with, the more work it takes. But we’ve proven that doing that work can get kids to school,” says Glynn.

Outcomes

Indicators for success include improvement in attendance, academic performance and social engagement. The TPP demonstrates success in all three areas:

1. Improved Attendance

The TPP targets students who had 15 – 40 absences in the prior school year. Most TPP students' attendance significantly improved.

For TPP students who made gains in attendance, average attendance was better than the rate for their school as a whole.

Alfred E. Burr Elementary School

2013-2014

74% of students who participated in the TPP improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 95%.

The school's average attendance was 91.8% (HPS 2014)

2014-2015

61% of students who participated in the TPP improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 94.5%.

The school's average attendance was 92% (HPS 2015)

Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School

2013-2014

96% of students who participated in the TPP improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 94%.

The school's average attendance was 92.5% (HPS 2014)

2014-2015

79% of students who participated in the TPP improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 90.4%.

The school's average attendance was 91.6% (HPS 2015)

2. Increased Academic Performance

Percent of participants who increased writing proficiency by one letter grade. (All schools)

2011-2012 - 68%

2012-2013 - 73%

2013-2014 - 80%

Percent of participants who received a passing score using a rubric responding to prompts on reading for information skills aligned to the Connecticut Mastery Test and the Connecticut Common Core Standards. (All schools)

2011-2012 - 62%

2012-2013 - 75%

2013-2014 - 83%

3. Improved Social Engagement

The TPP focuses on connecting students to pro-social activities and building leadership and self-reliance. The program's family centered approach is key to achieving these goals.

Though difficult to measure quantitatively, the TPP works to improve social engagement by linking every student to a new pro-social activity, whether a group field trip or gathering or an extra-curricular activity in the community.

Systemic Change – Helping Every Child

“When attendance is a problem, the onus to change is not all on the student or family.” Marisa Halm, Director TeamChild Juvenile Justice Project, Center for Children’s Advocacy

A highly regarded, experienced educational consultant from the Center for Children’s Advocacy (CCA) reviews academic histories of selected TPP students and makes recommendations for the school to meet the child’s needs. CCA’s advocacy sometimes rises to the level of legal representation. Students often have learning disabilities or mental health needs for which there is no adequate plan of service. There are significant gains in attendance and other measures of success when appropriate support is provided.

The Center for Children’s Advocacy supports the legal rights of TPP students, and of students throughout partner schools and throughout the state. CCA provides direct services and statewide, systemic policy work. “There is no question that each of these informs the other,” says Attorney Marisa Halm.

“Are there systemic issues going on here?”

In the 2014 academic year, CCA saw a spike in out-of-school suspensions in one of its partner schools. There was no in-school suspension program at the school, which was driving educators to impose a more exclusionary form of discipline. CCA was potentially in the position of challenging a partner, the host school.

“We frame it as a resource issue, so we maintain the partnership. We advocated to the superintendent for school resources to create an in-school suspension program,” says Attorney Halm. “Our systemic advocacy helps students in the program, but it also helps every child in the school.”

For example, TPP program staff witnessed school staff repeatedly failing to observe the basic disciplinary rights of special education students in compliance with special education law. CCA brought this issue to the attention of the Board of Education, which resulted in corrective action for the individual students and new commitment to ongoing professional development for staff in charge of discipline at the individual school level.

Communication is Key

“My number one-goal is for students to be successful. Attendance is super important. Once children fall behind, it’s very difficult for them to catch up to their peers.” Dr. Doreen Crawford, Principal, Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School

Good attendance can be promoted from many quarters, all of which the TPP uses to its advantage. “I love the TPP. It’s the relationships piece that I totally admire,” says Crawford.

Dr. Crawford has been a strong advocate for the program because staff works closely with students and with parents and educators. “This is a neighborhood where parents need a lot of

support to make sure their children are in school,” she says. MLK is a neighborhood school in a low-income community where many families are new to the United States.

While the relationship between school administration and the TPP is strong, it is not simple. TPP staff frequently advocates for children to get testing and additional services, and Crawford does not always agree that is appropriate. However, Crawford says those differences need not be deal breakers when they are handled openly and respectfully, and that has been her experience with the TPP.

“Talk to us about what is happening and how we can work together as a team,” she says, “because we are all working together for the same cause,” she says.

Lessons Learned

When success seems impossible, children stop attending school.

Many students enter the TPP already far behind their peers. If they are struggling academically because of unmet special education needs, school is a tough sell. Through the advocacy component, the TPP ensures that children are identified and getting the services they need to be successful in school. The academic component strengthens their performance.

It is not just the child who needs to change.

Students do better – and are therefore more likely to show up – when the conditions they encounter at school are conducive to success. That may mean a solid plan to meet special learning needs or a step away from exclusionary discipline. Reviewing student files to find barriers has helped the team advocate for better services for individual students, has helped CCA push for school-wide changes that improve climate, and has helped begin legislative advocacy to create more inclusive schools statewide.

Family matters.

The challenges faced by an entire family may get in the way of school attendance. Parents for whom education was not a priority in their own youth may not understand the importance of strong attendance. The TPP engages family members through phone calls, home visits and gift cards awarded when children substantially improve attendance. As the TPP pilots work with children in first and second grades, family engagement becomes even more important because younger children are more dependent on their caregivers to get to school.

Schools must buy in.

Removing a child from class for court sessions is significant. The TPP makes it clear that these sessions and TPP support will help students with academics because better attendance will increase overall instructional time. School principals with strong buy-in is key to the TPP's success.

Interventions must be holistic.

Every team member interviewed agreed that each player was necessary for a child to be successful. Advocacy, case management and mentoring are all essential components – and these components must work together. Case managers play an important role in coordinating these services and connecting families.

Attendance is a window to broader issues.

Because truancy is frequently the result of multiple challenges in a child's life, addressing truancy is an opportunity to make broad improvements in that child's well-being. For example, a

Village caseworker talking with a TPP student learned that the child had suffered abuse. Though the abuse had ended, there had been no services provided to help the child deal with the trauma, which continued to shape his life. Getting the boy help did far more than improve his school attendance.

High school is too late.

Students who perform poorly in grade 9 are at high risk of dropping out. The TPP helps students get on track before they begin high school. A 2013 study found that students who exhibited poor grades, attendance or behavior in grade 8 were likely to continue to struggle in grade 9 and had only a 30 percent chance of finishing high school.

In contrast, students who exhibited the same risk factors in grade 8 but received supportive intervention had the same graduation rate as students who had exhibited no warning signs.³ The TPP has reached out to younger and younger children in its ten-year history. First, the TPP served high school students. The TPP now concentrates on grades 6 – 8, and has begun programs with students in grades 1 and 2.

Reward success.

Success is rewarded throughout the program – for monthly, semester and yearlong attendance goals and other achievements. Rewards are tangible gift cards (for kids and families), and/or positive reinforcement from team members who look for opportunities to praise effort and progress.

Plan for continued success.

Students do better in high schools that are geared to their particular strengths and interests. The TPP works with families to help children select the best match from the state's magnet, charter and other schools and helps families with the application process.

³ Messel, Matthew; MacIver, Martha. "The ABCs of Keeping On Track to Graduation: Research Findings from Baltimore," Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk. 2013.
Accessed ecs.org/rs/Studies/DetailStudy.aspx?study_ID=a0r70000003qCxLAAU